

ITALIAN IN SOUTH AUSTRALIA: SUCCESSIONS AND FAILURES

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The question of the teaching of Italian in South Australia can be viewed from a number of different perspectives. My approach in this paper is from the point of view of a tertiary educator.¹

Although a few schools were teaching it in the late-Sixties - early-Seventies, it is reasonable to say that Italian as a subject in the Schools curriculum received its major impetus with the establishment of a Chair at the Flinders University of South Australia in 1970.² It was only the second Chair of Italian in the whole of Australia and its institution placed the language on an equal footing, in terms of prestige, with French, German and Spanish, already available in this State. The first students were enrolled in 1971, and in the first decade - as well as regular students entering tertiary studies on completion of what was then Matriculation - a considerable number of practising teachers too completed a major in Italian. These were to form the backbone of a constantly growing corpus of educators, who promoted and guided the expansion of the language in the primary and secondary sectors and into other tertiary institutions in South Australia.³

As multiculturalism gained momentum and became a major political issue in the course of the Seventies, and as the expansion of the teaching of community languages in schools became an important goal in education policy, the State Government decided that further opportunities for the training of teachers in that area were desirable; as a result, the Department of Italian Studies was instituted at the then South Australian College of Advanced Education on Kintore Avenue, where degree courses were established for that purpose; these were in operation between 1976 and 1992 and provided a source of educators for a then expanding industry.⁴ The new awareness of community needs, typical of the Seventies, also led, in 1977, to the establishment (again at Kintore Avenue) of an Associate Diploma in Interpreting and Translating, covering Italian, Greek and Vietnamese, to which, in 1982, was

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added a Bachelor's degree in the same skills (to NAATI level III) and subsequently (1988) a Graduate Diploma.⁵ Finally, in 1979, the Department of Technical and Further Education also entered the Italian arena with the establishment of a lectureship in that language. As well as offering a wide range of service courses, it too has trained Interpreters in Italian (to NAATI Level II).⁶

From the above account it can be seen that the Seventies in South Australia was a period of considerable activity in promoting opportunities for the acquisition of academic and professional qualifications and skills in the Italian language. Apart from the introduction of Italian into the Magill campus of what was to become the University of South Australia, the only other development to occur in the Eighties - but it was an important one - was the extension, in 1982, of the teaching of Flinders University degree courses in Italian to the Adelaide University campus; this move gave students of that University the possibility of studying Italian without having to travel to Flinders, something that only a dedicated and adventurous few had been willing to undertake.

The Nineties have witnessed some erosion of the opportunities for pursuing tertiary studies in Italian, due essentially to the amalgamation of the Kintore Avenue campus of the SACAE with Adelaide University, which has resulted in the winding down of Interpreting and Translating and of the teacher-training courses, though the methodological component of the latter has been subsumed by the end-on post-graduate Diploma of Education.⁷ In spite of this, Italian remains the only language other than English that is available to students of all four tertiary institutions in this State: TAFE, Flinders and Adelaide Universities and the Magill campus of the University of South Australia (with an outreach programme on the Salisbury campus to be fully implemented in 1994). This, together with the fact that, after English, Italian is the most widely spoken language in this State, should have guaranteed it a position of preeminence at all levels of education in South Australia.

However, this primacy in availability at tertiary level and in community use is not matched elsewhere in the statistical evidence at our disposal.⁸ Although Italian is the most widely taught LOTE in the Primary sector, in the secondary schools and in the universities, Italian still lags behind French and German, the foreign languages preferred in traditional anglophonic societies, and is in danger of losing its overall third position to other languages, most notably Spanish, Japanese, Indonesian and Chinese. The reasons for this are well-known and stem from circumstances largely beyond the control of

those engaged in the teaching of Italian: the weight of tradition, which favours French and German; the disarray of the Education Department's LOTEs policy and its cavalier treatment of LOTE teachers in the primary sector;⁹ the merciless push at top Government level for Asian languages; the lack - for many years - of support from any meaningful, dynamic cultural policy promoted by the Italian State;¹⁰ the general disinterest in cultural matters displayed by the majority of the Italian community itself....¹¹ All these are weighty forces that practitioners and devotees of Italian language and culture have to battle against constantly. They are forces that might be termed 'external', because they are beyond the direct control of teachers of Italian. But there may also be other reasons, stemming from *inside* the sphere of the teaching of Italian, from directions and choices that may not have been the most appropriate and that need rethinking and perhaps revision. This is an area that has not been explored and that requires investigation. And that investigation must be a combined effort on the part of those who are professionally involved at the various levels of promoting the teaching of the Italian language, despite the fact that in this State it seems to be Government policy to keep primary, secondary and tertiary education as autonomous and as independent of one another as possible.

Here are some of the issues that I believe require investigation and that I pose in the form of questions.

[1] In view of the fact that Italian is the most widely taught LOTE in the primary sector, why is it that enrolments in the secondary sector are so low in the State Schools and non-existent in the Independent Schools (whereas in the Catholic Schools they are clearly superior to those of any other foreign language)? An investigation of possible 'internal' reasons might well examine the adequacy of syllabuses and methodology and of educators' attitude to students' abilities and to students' interest in real learning.¹²

[2] When offered a choice of language(s) not previously studied, why are the students in State Secondary Schools who opt for Italian so few?¹³ And are there 'internal' reasons why the numbers proceeding to Year 12 are stagnant? It might well be worth examining whether the content of the Year 12 syllabuses provides an adequate foundation for further serious study (tertiary educators are not convinced that it does); whether the skill of communication without accuracy and without breadth of content is a sufficiently technical preparation for competitive performance in the work force and in the tertiary environment; whether the existing syllabus was drawn up

[a] with sufficient attention to the plurality of student needs, and/or [b] with over-indulgence in theoretical methodological innovations; whether the well-intentioned desire to support the so-called 'native' speaker has not in fact had the effect of distancing the non-native speaker from attempting Italian.¹⁴ The latter is a particularly sensitive issue, because if Italian is to be a language for South Australia it must be made attractive and accessible to all and must not run the risk of finding itself trapped in an ethnic ghetto.

[3] Why are relatively few students proceeding from secondary to tertiary studies in Italian? The Flinders Italian Discipline, both on its home campus and at the University of Adelaide, relies heavily for its first-year enrolments on beginners. The relative dearth of new enrolments of continuing students might point to a critical compounding of negative factors encountered over the first two stages of learning and/or to the necessity of responding to a variety of needs with a variety of programmes in the tertiary sector.

These, along with other matters that others can undoubtedly identify, require serious attention.

In summary, the two principal aims of this paper have been [a] to show that, over the last twenty years, this State has built up formidable human resources with appropriate qualifications in Italian to promote and extend the teaching of the language; and [b] to suggest the urgent need for an analysis of the situation and of the prospects for Italian in South Australia, an analysis that should be the result of a concerted and collaborative effort, one that unites the fiefs of primary, secondary and tertiary teaching into a confederation whose sole interest should be to promote Italian in such a way that the learning of it is both attractive *and* challenging, both functional *and* technically sound, and both practically *and* culturally rewarding.

NOTES

¹ In preparing this paper, I have received generous assistance from Dr Enza Tudini and Piera Carroli (The University of South Australia), Angela Mauro and Romano Rubichi (The University of Adelaide), Michele Giglio and Antonella Nichinonni (TAFE), and Messrs John Dean, Alan Cleggett and Keith Knight (LOTE Coordinators at Adelaide High School, Unley High School and Charles Campbell Secondary School respectively).

² Due tribute should be paid here to the contribution of the Comitato Pro-Cattedra, an enthusiastic and dedicated group within the Italian community, who not only lobbied hard but

also collected from the community a substantial sum of money, which was donated towards the establishment of the Chair.

³ In fact, between 1971 and 1992, 292 have graduated (either at Adelaide or at Flinders University) with pass majors in Italian; a further 51 have graduated with honours. At the post-graduate level, 1 Diploma in Humanities, 6 Masters and 4 Doctorates have been awarded; indeed, the exporting of academics throughout Australasia has been one of the Italian Discipline's major achievements.

⁴ During the period of operations, some 200 graduates emerged having completed all levels in Italian in a variety of degree courses: Bachelor of Education, Graduate Diploma in Community Languages, Graduate Diploma in Translation, Bachelor of Arts (Liberal Studies). The amalgamation of the Kintore Avenue campus with the University of Adelaide has resulted in the disestablishment of this Department. An outreach programme at the Magill campus of the College was inaugurated in 1983-84; subsequently, in 1989, an independent department was established there, which has now been integrated into the University of South Australia's new Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences; since 1989, 17 graduates have completed a major in Italian at that institution.

⁵ The Graduate Diploma was offered only once, since the school of Interpreting and Translating too fell victim to the processes of rationalisation stemming from amalgamation. During its years of operations (1977-92), some 115 graduates were produced with qualifications in Italian: over 80 in the Bachelor of Arts (Interpreting and Translating) programme, about 30 in the Associate Diploma programme and 3 in the Graduate Diploma.

⁶ Although the programme for Interpreters is still in operation, TAFE Italian's major activities have been in the areas of refresher courses for teachers and special short courses for commercial and professional use (e.g. most recently, for undertakers) and for leisure activities and travel. At the moment the Adelaide branch is acting as the centre for administering the *Certificazione di conoscenza della lingua italiana* in Australia on behalf of the University of Perugia.

⁷ The abolition of Interpreting and Translating is to be deplored, and is as much due to the lack of provision of appropriate funds by the State government to ensure graduate employment in that area as it is to the lack of available funding within the University of Adelaide to continue it.

⁸ Rubichi, R., *The Teaching of Italian in South Australia*. SAIL, 1992 (passim).

⁹ Instead of integrating LOTEs into the curriculum, as had been promised, the Education Department used them to give classroom teachers the non-contact time due to them. As a result many LOTEs teachers travel from school to school, seeing, in any one week, scores of children, with whom they can hardly build up a meaningful relationship.

¹⁰ The first native 'advisor' in Italian to the Education Department of South Australia was appointed in 1991, and Flinders University has been waiting for some 15 years for the allocation of an appropriate *lettore*. The Istituto Italiano di Cultura in Melbourne, which seems to have some cultural responsibilities towards South Australia, has been conspicuously absent in this State.

¹¹ The list of sponsors for this Conference quickly reveals how many Italian clubs, institutions and businesses responded to the two hundred odd letters that were sent by its organisers asking for support.

¹² A preliminary investigation into student LOTE choice(s) at Year 8 level strongly suggests that as many change language(s) as continue because either they "wanted a change" or more specifically because they were "bored" and/or had grown to "hate" the language learnt at primary school, for a variety of reasons, not least among them the indignity of an often puerile curriculum.

¹³ Only 18.5% of the relevant responses in the preliminary investigation referred to in the previous note, which was conducted in three schools where Italian is among the languages offered.

¹⁴ No statistics are available, but there is no lack of students, parents and teachers who will claim that it has had precisely that effect.

THIRTY YEARS OF TEACHING ITALIAN IN SOUTH AUSTRALIA

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We heard from Desmond O'Connor - in his splendid presentation of the early history of Italian presence in South Australia - that some teaching of Italian might have started soon after the arrival of Antonio Giannoni in 1839. Many others followed, until we meet Giorgio Masero, who came to Australia in 1951. Today we will limit ourselves to a brief overview of the last 30 years or so, that is, the period of time of which I have direct experience. From that we should be able to form an opinion on the situation at present.

In the early 1960s Italian was taught only in very few schools, mainly Catholic colleges. A group of young teachers (young at the time!) complemented this by offering Saturday and Sunday classes under the aegis of the Dante Alighieri Society, and received for their efforts a bottle of Alberti liquor kindly donated by Giorgio Masero, the organiser of those classes. Giorgio Masero himself taught a number of very successful courses as part of the Continuing Education Programme at the University of Adelaide. Some of those teachers are here today - Bice Della Putta, for example. Others were Emma Franco, Mrs Di Padova, Mrs Tessari, and myself.

Years later, the Centro Didattico, Clubs and Associations continued this type of community-based teaching, thanks also to the financial support of the State and Federal Governments as well as the Italian Government through the Italian Consulate.

Meanwhile, Italian became a publicly examined subject for those completing secondary education, with exam papers no longer having to come from Victoria. It was also introduced in some primary schools, starting at Cowandilla, which was then a demonstration school. But the most significant development was the founding of the Chair of Italian at Flinders University in 1970, actively supported by the Italian community, after the unsuccessful attempt to introduce Italian at the University of Adelaide.

The years that saw the greatest growth of interest in Italian were undoubtedly the 1970s. In response to a petition organised by the Italian Educa-

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